An Overview of the Paper Review and Selection Process used by TRB Public Transportation Planning and Development Committee (AP025):

Each year the Public Transportation Planning and Development Committee receives a large number of papers to review for possible presentation and publication by the Transportation Research Board (TRB). These papers range from highly theoretical to very practical. It is refreshing to see that there are a lot of people interested in public transport and want to share the results of their work with others.

We will attempt to describe how the review process occurs and some problems that we encounter. The purpose of this is to help authors and reviewers understand how papers are be handled and to lead to better documentation of research results that can aid the profession and practice of transit planning.

Reviewer Responsibilities

Paper reviews require a commitment of time and we are very grateful that people are willing to help. Good reviews help the profession and are a good way for reviewers to keep up with the latest developments in their field.

TRB provides guidance for reviewers at:
http://pressamp.trb.org/submissions/ReviewerMenu.asp?event=756&view=ri

These are useful to look at to help you do a good review.

Papers are assigned to reviewers in middle August. There is roughly one month to collect the reviews and to make decisions on the papers, which is an extremely tight schedule. If you are assigned a review and do not feel you can do the review for whatever reason, let the review chair know as soon as possible. By promptly letting us know, the paper can be reassigned to someone else. Every attempt is made to match reviewers to papers, but it can be difficult. Each paper has a mix of reviewers, some new and some very experienced. After the program is finalized, copies of all reviews are shared with the authors and reviewers. This can be a good way to compare your review with others.

A good review should critically examine the good and bad points of the paper and provide thoughtful comments that can be used by the authors to revise the paper and/or their research. Of course there should be a match between the ratings and the comments. It is confusing to the paper chair and to the author if the comments don’t match the ratings (the comments are highly critical but the paper is rated ‘excellent’ for example). Even worse are no comments by the reviewers. What should the author do to fix the paper?
The Review Process

Each paper must receive a minimum of 3 reviews, and is assigned to at least 4 reviewers. The committee makes recommendations to TRB for acceptance, revision or rejection. Reviewers shouldn’t be from the same agency as authors and it is a semi-blind review in that the authors will not know who reviewed their paper, but the reviewers do see the authors’ names. Typically about one half or so of the papers submitted are recommended for presentation and only 22% (as set by TRB) of papers submitted for publication can be recommended for publication. The inside cover of TRB's Transportation Research Record journal gives information about the process used to select papers as well.

The committee takes the process of review extremely seriously. We try to match the papers received to the specific interests and skills of the committee members and friends who are assigned reviews. Matching papers one-by-one to the interests and skills of the individual reviewers makes it more interesting to reviewers, and thereby helps to maximize the number of reviews that actually get done. Time spent on one-to one personal matching also serves to have as many good and credible reviews as possible in order to maximize the objectivity of the evaluation. The process, from receipt of papers, to assignment, to reviews, to decision, must take place in just over a single month. TRB has strict procedures and deadlines for decisions and it is vital to get a good set of credible reviews for each paper.

The results of the paper reviews can be difficult to deal with. Roughly one third of the papers are clearly not good enough and easy to eliminate, while typically a bit less than a third receive good reviews leading to obvious acceptance. The papers that fall in the middle area represent a significant challenge by receiving mixed reviews and scores, sometimes with diametrically opposite opinions from different respected reviewers; these papers make for difficult decisions.

To deal with these difficult papers, the following factors are taken into consideration:

- Scores both overall weighted score and score specifically for presentations, (which the authors do not see),
- Reviewers, including the number of reviewers, knowledge of the reviewers in terms of their skills, interests, and known biases, and the quality of what they have provided in the past,
- Comments from the reviewers, including those comments that authors see and those that they don’t,
- Divergence between comments and scores (more common than one would think),
- The paper review chair’s personal judgment on the degree of innovation of the paper topic or technique,
• The topic itself, in terms of its interest to the committee, and possible value to include, despite mixed scores and reviews, etc.

All this becomes difficult because papers have been trending away from the balance that we traditionally have had between analytic and practitioner-oriented papers. The committee has needed to draw on a wider set of reviewers from different backgrounds in order to get enough reviews to make decisions.